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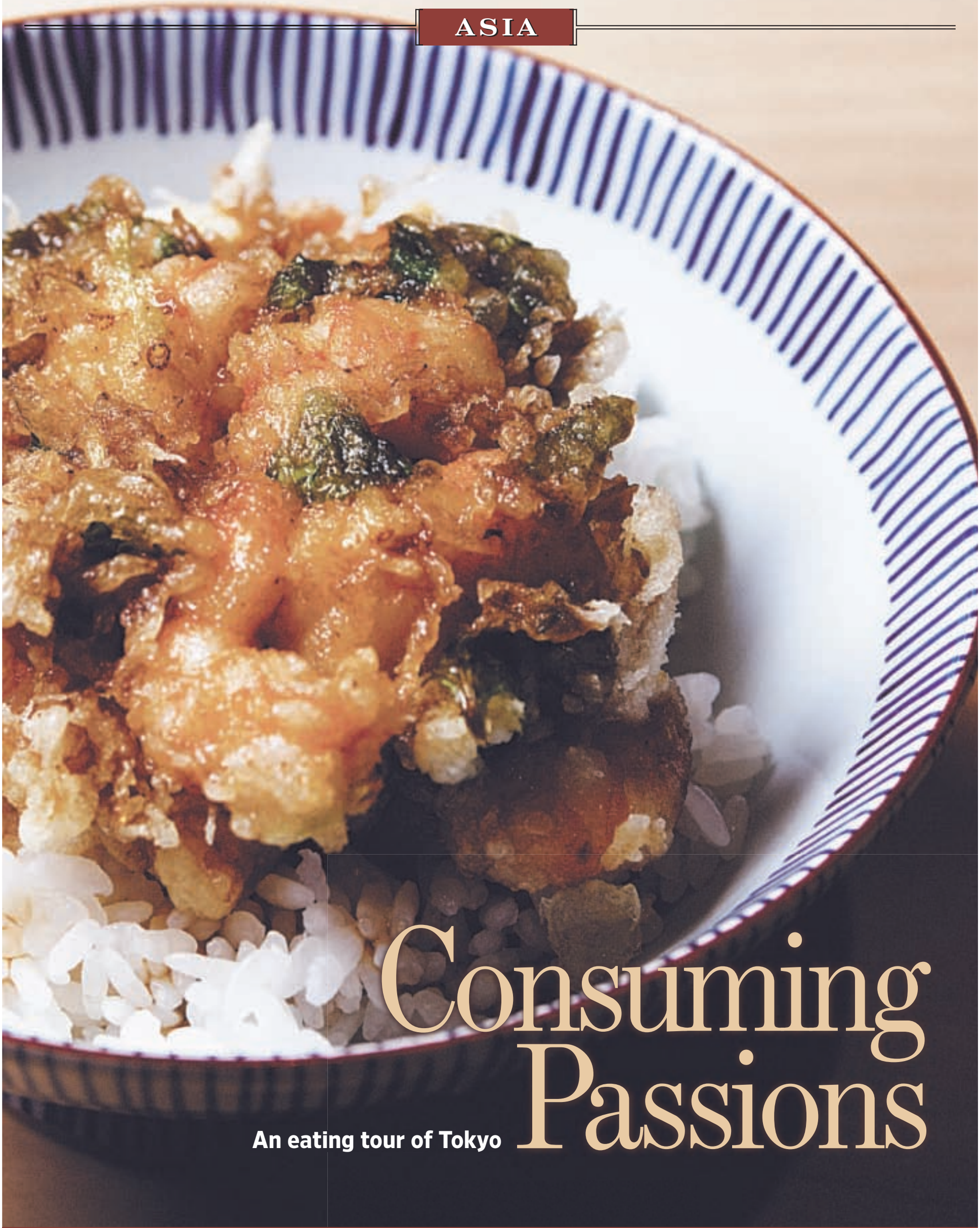

Consuming Passions

An eating tour of Tokyo

Inside: What's next in design

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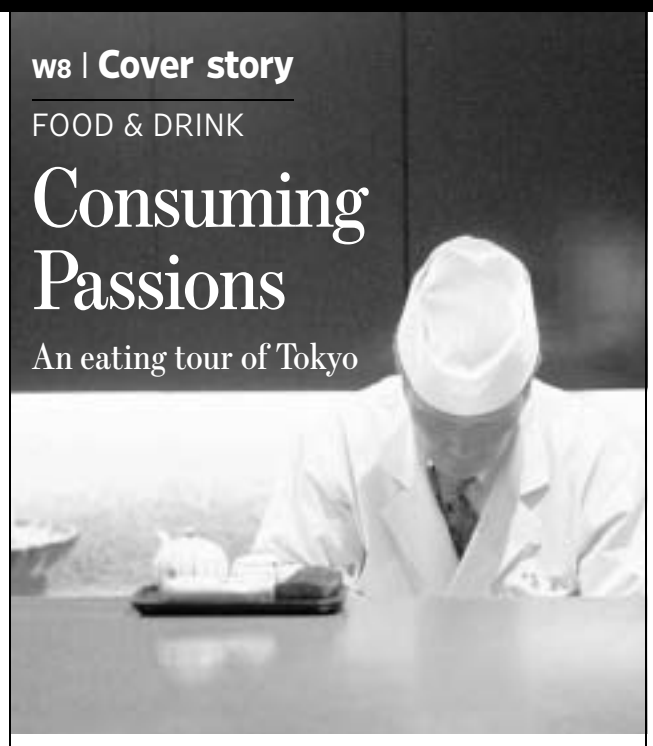
An eating tour of Tokyo



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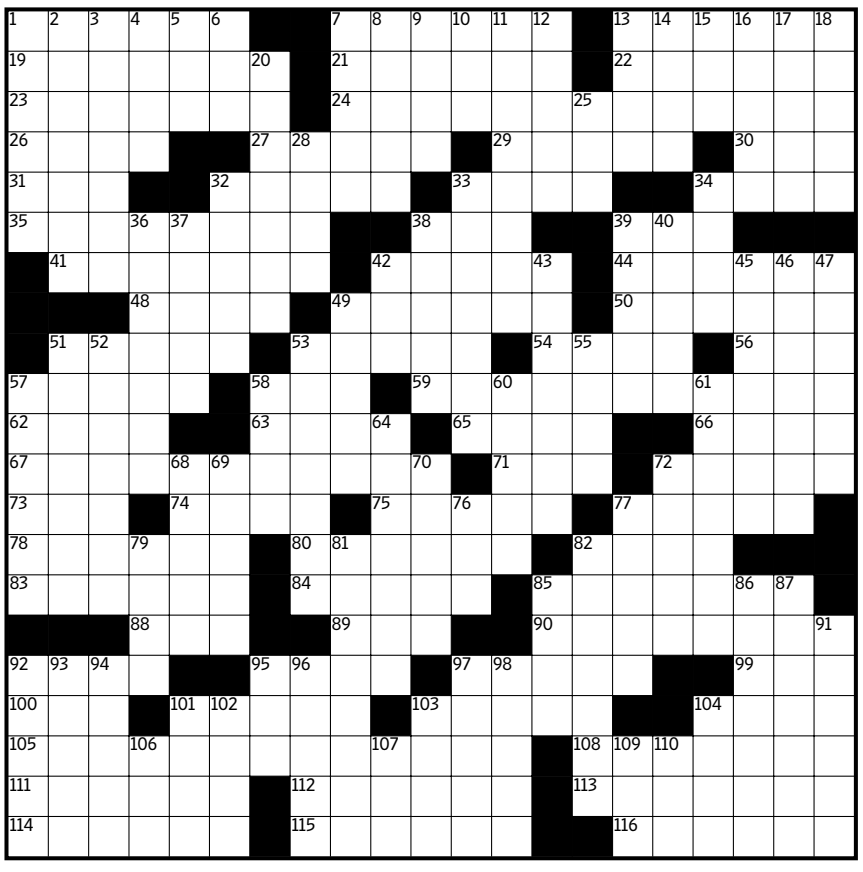

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Last Week's solution

■	C	A	P	R	I	■	T	R	A	M	P	L	E	■
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An all-new you

Why one former executive sold her entire wardrobe on eBay

By Christina Binkley

Earlier this month, Alicia Kan put her old wardrobe up for sale on eBay. "New Decade closet purge!" she tweeted to her 1,049 Twitter followers.

This sudden sale of Hermès scarves and Donna Karan dresses, at prices starting at $19.95, marks a new phase of Ms. Kan's life. Last autumn, she left her job as a high-ranking communications executive, and, like many people in transition, she wants an image to match the new life she's pursuing. Out with St. John dresses and Armani suits. In with Y-3 hoodies and Hugo Boss motorcycle boots. "I want to dress like Blondie in the '80s," she says.

Many of us have felt the desire to shed our skin, an urge that can be ignited by a new job, a change in marital status, weight loss, the arrival at midlife or just a new year. Postdivorce Madonna has returned to her vampy roots in Dolce & Gabbana, but her British Dame phase is still warm to the touch. Former Time Warner chief executive Gerald Levin has traded in his Wall Street pinstripes for the more yogi-like look of the New Agey spa owner that he is now. Even designers change their skins. Remember the chubby, dorky Marc Jacobs? Today with his cut body and knee-revealing kilts, he seems to be another man.

Tabloid stories suggest these celebrity transformations happen overnight. But reinventing oneself is an emotional experience. "Packing [the clothes] up for shipping is saying good-bye to a former life," says Ms. Kan.

For most people, it isn't easy to purge a closet, especially when it's full of items that were once meaningful. Christos Garkinos, co-owner of high-end Los Angeles consignment shop DecadesTwo, says he often has to coach people as they work up the gumption to relinquish items from their former selves to his boutique. And he often gets calls days later, when a client regrets having let go of an item.

One client, he says, sat on her bed and shivered with emotion as he sorted through her wardrobe. "I actually would have to stop and give her reassuring hugs and have her give 'permission' to let her clothes go," he says.

People often feel the need to reinvent themselves when they reach midlife or the years before retirement, says Dr. Barbara Becker Holstein, a psychologist in New Jersey who specializes in, among other things, life transitions. It's common for people like Ms. Kan to feel that they've compromised too much of themselves for their job or their marriage, and to want to rectify that by starting afresh.

Sally Ryan for The Wall Street Journal (4); Getty Images (Jacobs)

◀ **AFTER** A more relaxed look: vintage Dior jacket, gray Alp-N-Rock T-shirt and Uniqlo jeans

▲ **BEFORE** A Pauline Trigère dress, green Olivia Harris handbag and blue Alexis Hudson clutch spelled buttoned-up corporate.

Designer Mark Jacobs before (top) and after

(I suspect that the pace of change in technology and business also contributes to people's sense that it's time to change skins. Our jobs and industries keep moving, morphing and disappearing, creating opportunities for image changes—and the fear that we'll need to change, whether we like it or not.)

Despite the lure of letting go, Dr. Holstein suggests avoiding hasty decisions to leave a job or home or even to toss out significant portions of your closet. And she warns against purging photos and mementos—items that can never be replaced if your feelings change later. "The average person has a natural pull to stay connected to who they were," she says.

Once a transition is in the works, it's important to recognize that more than objects will be ejected. "You look at your Linked In contacts and think, 'They're not all going to make the journey with me,'" says Ms. Kan.

Until last autumn, Ms. Kan was global head of communications for Synovate, a market-research unit of London's Aegis Group. A corporate road warrior, she shopped her way through the world's luxury zones in Cairo, Prague, London and Chicago on the endless itinerary of a global executive. She had Hermès scarves and Celine furs.

She says her decision to reinvent herself came last summer, when her boss of a dozen years announced his retirement: "I thought, 'I want to look on the other side of the fence, too.'"

Since her departure from the company, Ms. Kan, who is 44 years old and single, has joined the board of an innovative Chicago chamber-music ensemble called Fifth House, and she is looking for work that will feel more meaningful to her. "I want to create social value, not shareholder value now," she says.

Ms. Kan sold her first tranche of clothes on eBay in December, having set up lights and a dress form in her apartment to photograph her pants, tops, dresses and accessories. There's sentiment in nearly everything she's shedding. Selling her first Armani jacket was an emotional moment. "I clinched a job when I wore it to an interview, so it was my lucky jacket," she says. "I also remember saving up for it; I wanted an Armani so badly. Whenever I wore my Armani, I felt strong and confident and ready to take on the world."

'These clothes served me well,' says Ms. Kan. 'I want them to find a good home.'

She learned that her very expensive wardrobe wasn't worth nearly as much on the resale market. That Armani jacket, for example, sold for $36. She is focusing on the fact that she is recycling useful items in order to open a new chapter. "These clothes served me well. I want them to find a good home," she says.

In fact, those suits and Prada handbags represent the professional person she once struggled to define. She says she never felt entirely comfortable with corporate mores. "In college, I was the girl with blue hair who sat sullenly at the back of the classroom and made holes in her jeans with a seam ripper," she wrote me.

At her first public-relations job in Hong Kong, she says, she wore an Ann Taylor T-shirt and a long skirt; colleagues shifted their seats away from her in the lunch room. "I realized later that they were all wearing Chanel suits. I had no idea that how you dress was so important," she says. "That started my education on Bottega Veneta."

"In a way, I'm coming full circle. I feel like I'm coming home," she wrote in an email typed out as she sorted boxes in her new, smaller apartment. "Why do I have an evening clutch that lights up when you open it?" she asks. "I have a mink stole that I've never used. Who was this person who bought all these things?"

Arbitrage

A duplicate door key

City	Currency	US$
Manila	30 pesos	$0.65
Shanghai	5 yuan	$0.73
Kuala Lumpur	2.50 ringgit	$0.75
New York		$1.70
Singapore	S$3	$2.15
Bangkok	75 baht	$2.28
Jakarta	23,333 rupiah	$2.52
Hong Kong	HK$22	$2.83
Rome	€3	$4.27
Paris	€4	$5.69
London	£5.50	$8.98
Brussels	€6.50	$9.25
Frankfurt	€7	$9.96

Prices, including taxes, as provided by key makers in each city, converted to U.S. dollars

Shirt tales

The makings of a well-made shirt—it's all in the details

By Paula Park

Graeme Duddridge for The Wall Street Journal

Top, the gusset triangle on this Zegna shirt reinforces the side seam. Above, the buttons and buttonholes on this Kiton shirt are hand sewn. Left, a Brioni shirt (tape measure not included)

London designer Brian Clarke loves fashion and admits that sometimes he finds himself dominating conversations, particularly when his enthusiasm for a cut of cloth exceeds his audience's capacity to listen. He can hold forth on men's dress shirts for hours.

When he scrutinizes a ready-to-wear shirt, Mr. Clarke first runs his fingers along the fabric—both inside and out. With one touch, he's abuzz with praise for a white shirt by Italian company Brioni on display at Harrods in London. It's so silky it feels almost liquid and Mr. Clarke carries it toward a light to examine the fabric more closely. "This is very good cotton," he observes. "You can barely see the weave."

A lifetime connoisseur of shirts—who ran his own shirt-design and manufacturing studio for several years in the '80s—he's also a passionate consumer. Most customers don't understand about 75% of the elements that go into making a high-quality shirt, he says. But Mr. Clarke, a former tailor, revels in the minutiae: A collar has five pieces, he notes, while the collar stand, or the strip of fabric between the collar and the yoke, has three. The way each piece is cut, the kind of cloth fastened inside the collar for strengthening and even the way that cloth is placed make a big difference to the way a shirt feels.

Shirt-making is a serious business—and the devil is entirely in the details. Jean-Claude Colban, who runs the French clothier and shirt-maker Charvet with his sister Anne-Marie, spends several weeks a year at his computer terminal, creating a few hundred unique color swatches—shifting the scale of stripes, slightly changing the color relationships. Even a white shirt has both overtones and undertones, after all, and the hue of a blue yarn changes, for instance, when set beside another color. Mr. Colban registers each color combination he creates, so that Charvet holds the sole rights to it.

"We do not just develop patterns to show to stores," Mr. Colban says, noting that he not only markets Charvet's shirts, but designs them as well. "We are like wine merchants...growing their own vines."

Like the wine market, the ready-made men's shirt world is crowded with products of varying style, quality and substance. The differences can be subtle—an extra stitch at the back of a button, a bit of glue inside a cuff—but those intricacies determine the way a shirt feels against the skin and how it looks after being cleaned. The signals of excellence lie in the quality of the fabric, color and finish. The construction of the shirt also determines its value and longevity.

Charvet shirts are part of a niche upscale market that also includes Italian brands like Brioni, which tailors hand-finished features like button holes, and Kiton, whose shirts are mostly hand-sewn. These clothiers tend to be family businesses and they all do custom tailoring.

Mr. Colban takes his time to ensure that he can control each phase in the design, and for him, an essential part of the creative process is the dialog with the dyer.

"We defend the subtle differences in shade," he relates. "We have a hidden association for the protection of color." To achieve that color, many designers prefer to use Italian mills.

"You can't get the color definition anywhere else that the Italians get in the dying process," said Marc Psarolis, managing director at Duchamp—a U.K. clothing line that is all about intense hues. "We can give them our color palettes and they get it."

Artisan clothiers like Charvet are constantly undermined by cheaper producers in Asia and by fashion houses that market designs with elegant features, but sometimes cut costs and corners. One corner that can be cut: the quality of cotton. All cotton is finished with chemicals; and cheaper cottons can be made to look beautiful using finishes that wash out.

Mr. Colban uses Egyptian cotton, also the dominant fabric for Kiton and Brioni shirts. Egypt's heat and humidity help to generate a cotton boll with long, firm fibers. Twisted into yarn, the long strands of cotton make the final fabric firmer and smoother to the touch. The binding and weave of the fabric add more to the lustrous feel.

The size and style of stitching are also important. Tiny stitches are considered more beautiful and blend better with the colors of a fabric. A slower speed of sewing also improves quality. Brioni uses older machines that can create about 150 to 300 stitches a minute. A new machine does 3,000 to 4,000 stitches a minute. Slower sewing allows the shirt makers to better align stripes, plaids and checks.

The stitching style can add subtle design motifs. Mr. Colban, like other designers, will sometimes incorporate twill—diagonal stitches made by threads finished with a high gloss—to add shine to the fabric, for example. A slightly denser yarn woven in a pattern with the lighter strands gives body to the fabric and dimension to the colors.

Shirt makers such as Kiton, Charvet and Brioni aren't for everyone's taste. Their designers say they have an old-fashioned, classic approach and they remain reluctant to take on new trends, willy-nilly. Charvet's Mr. Colban customizes shirts for clients from as far away as Hong Kong. What a shirt maker learns from crafting a shirt for a single customer translates into ready-made products.

Brian Clarke bought his first tailored suit in the 1970s after finishing school. From a working-class immigrant family of seven children, he worked for three months as a factory hand to pay the £60 (about $98 today) for that suit. When he discovered his knack for sketching clothing designs, he enrolled in the London College of Fashion. He worked for a pittance for a tailor part time and has since designed clothes for the BBC, some feature films and rock bands. Constantly changing jobs to learn more about the profession, he's lived on a knife's edge, he says. Today, he works in property development.

For Mr. Clarke, the perfect shirt is custom-made. But a ready-made shirt can approximate perfection. First, the fabric should be of high quality, he says; it should be firm with a smooth feel. A consumer can check the density of the weave by holding a shirt to the light. Light will only partly penetrate a shirt if it's made of quality fabric with a dense weave.

Mr. Clarke advises checking the cuffs and collar for a bit of slack between the outer and inner layers of fabric and the interior material. A customer should check that the pocket's stripes or checks are aligned with the background pattern, he says. The yoke and sleeve lines should match; and the collar stand—the piece of cloth below the collar that holds the top button—should line up with the front of the shirt.

The seams should have a minimum of six stitches per centimeter, he says. The tail should be long enough to stay tucked into a pair of trousers when a person raises his hand, and the side seams should be reinforced at the intersection of the two parts of the tail with a piece of cloth called a gusset.

At Harrods, Mr. Clarke checks the collar of a Lanvin shirt—it's soft to the touch, with no stiffening inner layer. A ribbon of unfinished fabric bands the collar, and a second one lines the button placket in the front. Those ribbons may fray, but that's the idea, he says. He points out features in the fabric—the smoothness of the weave, the matte finish—that signal quality. A tiny gusset is sewn inside the shirt.

Finally, Mr. Clarke opens the unique button holes on the shirt—created by the fold of two intersecting fabrics, rather than sewn on the placket front. "That's really hard to do," he says.

Duchamp

Color is coming back to men's shirts, with a splash. "This is an important part of the market," says London personal clothing buyer Angi Jones. "It allows a man to show his individuality." Designers at U.K. shirt-maker Duchamp draw inspiration from '40s and '50s women's fashion magazines, and from fine art and architecture. As Ms. Jones says, color "is not camp any more."

Lanvin

The casual look has influenced many shirt makers—and some mills have begun making prewashed cotton to soften the look of a dress shirt. Lucas Ossendrijver, head of menswear design at Lanvin, says he uses ribbon colors, jersey piping and dress shirts in denim for a "playful twist" on classic shirts. This shirt uses a slightly stiffer material in a contrasting color for the collar. "You can create a boss look one day, and a man-of-the-people look another day," says image consultant Jennifer Aston. "Most people need a range."

Brioni

A mark of distinction in a shirt is the cohesion of its separate elements—sleeve and yoke, button placket and shirt front. On this Brioni shirt, for example, the twill, or the diagonal stitches used to add shine to the shirt, is aligned perfectly, even in relatively unnoticed places, such as where the sleeve meets the back of the yoke. To do this, shirt makers use older, slower sewing machines, which sew only 150 to 300 stitches a minute. New machines execute as many as 4,000 a minute.

Zegna

Quality clothiers spend a great deal of time analyzing and adjusting a shirt's weave, as a shirt's texture is crucial to its appeal. Ermenegildo Zegna seams have around seven stitches a centimeter, a sign of quality. They are made of Egyptian cotton, according to Zegna Group's image director, Anna Zegna. Color is important, too. The maroon color of this Zegna shirt reflects a fashion trend that's catching on, particularly in the U.K.

Kiton

Hand stitching is a hallmark of fine shirts, and this Kiton shirt features 19 handcrafted elements. They include the collar, button holes, sleeves and yoke. Those elements matter. "Image is made of lots of little details," says image consultant Jennifer Aston. "The design, the tailoring, the shirt, the weave: Little details shout, quite loudly."

Charvet

The look and comfort of a shirt depends on its construction. For example, the makers of high-quality shirts, like this one by Charvet, sew cotton canvas inside the collar and cuffs to add firmness, though it's quicker and cheaper to get that effect by gluing an interface of synthetic fabric. The buttons are reinforced with thread for strength. "Guys can get away with wearing the same shirt, year after year," said Karen Grace, owner of the London personal-fashion consultancy Frumpy to Funky. Her advice: "Go for quality."

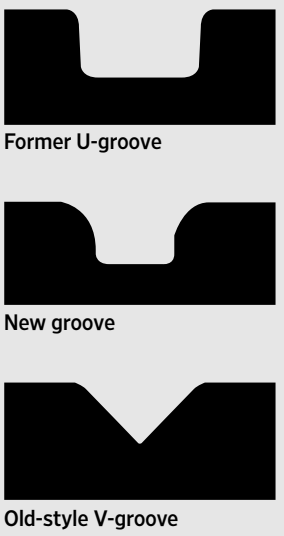
USGA gets its groove back

Golf's regulators force club makers to undo a design innovation

Above, a 7 iron with the new grooves. Left, drivers through the ages (plus a 2004 wedge): clockwise from the top, modern (titanium head); Jack Nicklaus's (wooden head/steel shaft, from 1961); the wedge; and Bobby Jones's (wooden head/wooden shaft, from the '20s). Below, golf balls advance from feather-stuffed to solid gutta-percha, rubber core and modern.

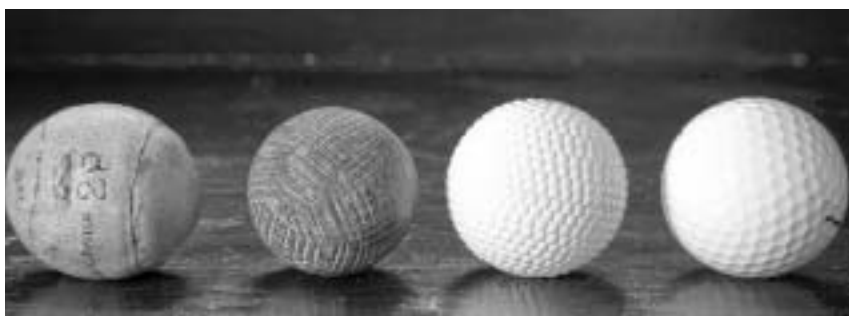
Rule changes

Comparing the newly required groove with two of its predecessors



Source: USGA

Christopher Villano for The Wall Street Journal



Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

Viewed from the playing position, the new grooves required on the professional golf tours this year are barely distinguishable from the old ones, which stopped being legal, or "conforming," on Dec. 31. If you pull a new-groove clubhead up close to your nose for closer inspection, however, you can see that the groove edges are a bit more rounded.

The volume of the grooves is also about 40% smaller, which means that less grass and moisture will be channeled away when grass comes between the ball and the clubface at impact. As a result of these changes, balls hit from thick grass will not spin as much or as predictably as they did when hit from similar lies with the old-style grooves, making it more difficult for the pros to control their approach shots. How much more difficult is an open question, which should provide golf fans with an intriguing little sideshow as the new, Tigerless PGA Tour season gets under way.

For the time being, the pros (and amateurs who qualify for national opens) are the only ones affected by the new groove ruling, which was promulgated simultaneously by the world's two governing golf bodies, the U.S. Golf Association and the Royal & Ancient. Elite amateurs competing in top events like the U.S. Amateur will have to start using the new grooves in 2014, but the rest of us can merrily continue playing with our current grooves until at least 2024. The only caveat is that clubs with old-style grooves will be deemed nonconforming if they are manufactured and shipped from clubmakers' warehouses after the end of this year, so the major makers will stop producing them in December.

You might consider stocking up now, but the truth is that the vast majority of amateurs won't notice much difference in the grooves. Most of us are happy just to hack the ball out of the rough, period. But the pros have become adept at hitting shots with enough backspin to roll back toward toward the pin even from lies that are meant to be punitive—far too adept, in the eyes of the regulators. Their skill at such shots has transformed driving accuracy almost into a secondary skill, which is a problem.

"The research we did showed that driving accuracy used to be nearly as important to scoring as putting, but starting in the 1990s that correlation fell off a cliff, and it took another dive around 2000," said Dick Rugge, USGA senior technical director.

One cause: The pros were hitting the ball farther; the average driving length climbed more than 25 yards between 1995 and 2003. The advantage of being that much closer to the hole more than offset the disadvantage of sometimes being in the rough. But another reason was the widespread adoption of the high-volume U-shaped grooves, or "square grooves," that were legalized in 1984 and made the penalty for missing the fairway even less severe. Some pros, including Tiger Woods, stuck with the older grooves on longer irons to avoid spinning the ball too much, but the U-shaped grooves were almost universally adopted in wedges.

Arnold Palmer was among the first to express serious concern about the situation to the USGA. "He felt it was taking away one of the key challenges of the game," Mr. Rugge said. So Mr. Rugge initiated research in 2004 that produced two lengthy white-paper reports—which he described as "guaranteed to cure insomnia"—and a rule proposal in 2007. After manufacturers and other concerned parties submitted comments, a few technical changes were made to the groove specifications and the period during which the old-grooves will remain legal for everyday players was extended to 2024 from 2020. Apparently only about 2% of clubs remain in service for longer than 15 years, so the USGA believes the changeover will be minimally inconvenient to the majority of golfers.

'This is by far the most extensively researched rule change that the USGA has ever made, and that's because it's the first time we have rolled back equipment rather than drawing a line and stopping something from going forward," Mr. Rugge said.

Anxiety about the march of golf technology is nothing new. Handwringing over balls that might make existing courses obsolete has been around since at least the late 19th century, when the revolutionary Haskell ball, with its wound-rubber-band core, began to usurp the shorter, solid-rubber gutta-percha ball. But until the early 20th century, there were no effective regulatory bodies to consider which advances were good for the game and which were not. The still-young USGA's first significant regulatory decision, in 1923, was to refuse to allow steel shafts in clubs. Two years later it reversed itself, and hickory shafts soon fell from favor.

The main thrust of USGA policy since then, when concerns arose about threats to the game, has been to codify the state of the art and say, "This far, but no farther." The organization limited the amount of spring-like, or trampoline, effect in clubheads in 1998. In 2004, in response to the surge in driving distance, the USGA limited the length of drivers to 48 inches—roughly 120 centimeters—and clubhead volume to 460 cubic centimeters.

As for balls, the USGA and R&A differed for most of the past century on the minimum allowable diameter and maximum weight; until 1990 the British ball was a tad smaller than the U.S. ball and flew somewhat farther. The USGA levied restrictions on the initial velocity of a ball coming off a clubhead in 1942 and set an overall distance standard in 1976.

But in rolling back existing technology, as with the new groove ruling, the USGA and R&A have entered new territory. One concern is that if the rank and file of golfers object to losing performance characteristics they once enjoyed, and continue to play with nonconforming equipment, the regulators will lose authority.

"The only power the USGA has is the consent of the governed," said Frank Thomas, Mr. Rugge's predecessor as the USGA's technical director, "and the game of golf needs a strong governing body." Mr. Thomas believes it would have been better to test the concept for two years on the pro tours before imposing the rule for everyone. Mr. Rugge said the USGA considered that idea, which he called "not unreasonable," but in the end, for a variety of reasons, decided against it. "We didn't think the PGA Tour should be the proving ground for our rules," he said.

Practically, however, that's what is taking place, starting at the small-field SBS Championship in Hawaii earlier this month. "There is definitely a difference, especially out of the Bermuda rough," said Geoff Ogilvy, the tournament's winner. This past weekend's full-field Sony Open Hawaii, with higher rough and smaller greens, provided more clues into how the pros will adapt. (John Daly and Dean Wilson both brought out wedges from the 1980s that slip past the new rule thanks to a 1990 legal settlement between the USGA and the maker, Ping.)

Some golfers, including Jack Nicklaus, believe—or hope—that the subtle groove change will create a domino effect, causing players to switch to softer balls that spin more, which in turn will result in shorter drives and a greater emphasis on old-fashioned shot making.

"With a softer ball, the game will change—and change for the better," Mr. Nicklaus said earlier this month. "It will bring some of the great courses in the world that had become obsolete because the ball went so far back into play." But that's speculation.

WHAT'S NEXT

By Alexandra A. Seno

The first in a series of articles pondering the shape of things to come

Almost 30 years ago, Ron Arad hit it big in the design world with a living-room chair made from the seat of a junked car. The Rover Chair, named for the British car maker whose bucket seat he repurposed, redefined industrial chic and made him famous.

Since then, Mr. Arad, the industrial designer, artist and architect who headed the design products department at London's Royal College of Art until last year, has pushed his field into new areas with innovative materials and shapes in furniture, fashion, art and architecture. The curvy, shape-as-you-like "Bookworm" shelf uses a thermoplastic polymer; a sleek lounge chair is made of polished and mirrored steel; earrings are polyamide, shaped using a process called laser sintering.

"The only reason to do something," says Mr. Arad, "is if you believe it can be done better than before." It's the creed of his field of work, to design things that are beautiful yet functional and that are thus, in theory, superior products.

Born in Tel Aviv, the 58-year-old designer has his own industrial-design and architecture firm—Ron Arad Associates—in London, where he has lived since 1973. He's married, with two daughters.

His work takes him all over the world: He was in Hong Kong recently for a one-man show at the Ben Brown Fine Arts gallery, where he sold several ping-pong tables of mirrored steel and bronze for US$490,000 each. His newest project is a video-screen-based installation that will be a focal point of "Restless," a survey of his work at London's Barbican Art Gallery beginning Feb. 18.

"I am like a pinball in the studio," says Mr. Arad. "There are deadlines, things that have to be done now, things I want to do now."

Weekend Journal Asia sat down with Mr. Arad during his recent stop in Hong Kong to talk about his work, his life and the future of industrial design.

Is there a limit to what you will create?

I will not design weapons.

Will machines replace people in manufacturing?

I remember when the Times [of London] changed from traditional printing to digital. There were big demonstrations. My sympathy was with the workers but you look at it now, what were we thinking? We arranged lead letters by hand before a newspaper was printed. Technology will replace some aspects and give us time to do other things. There is a lot of stuff that we don't even think about; we don't even bother remembering phone numbers anymore. I used to have a whole telephone book in my head. I don't anymore.

How has China's rise as a market and manufacturing base affected you?

Four years ago [on a trip to Hong Kong] I took a ferry to Shenzhen and visited factories that make copies of my furniture. I wasn't angry at them. I have some respect for the young entrepreneurs who started this. They created employment for 300 people. I complimented them on their choice of things to copy.

Why doesn't it bother you that your designs are being copied?

It bothers me. But it would bother me more if no one copied me. That means I'm not good enough.

What is your favorite design creation so far?

What's on the drawing board now.

Which one means the most to you?

My first chair [the Rover]: My children jumped on it. They were breast-fed on it.

How do you relax?

Snatch. It's Scrabble on steroids; it's anagrams and things.

What is the purpose of industrial design?

To make us better in some way, to delight us, to entertain us, to make sure we are comfortable and warm, safe and wealthy and amused.

What's next in the field of industrial design?

We can make things smaller, lighter, compact.

Alexandra A. Seno is a writer based in Hong Kong.

Ron Arad

Thomas Lee for The Wall Street Journal

WSJ.com

▶ To see more of Ron Arad and his designs, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

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Consuming Passions

An eating tour of Tokyo

By Yukari Iwatani Kane

A year after moving from Tokyo to San Francisco, my husband and I craved good Japanese food so much that we flew to Japan for three nights of eating.

San Francisco isn't exactly a culinary wasteland. It has great wine, an abundance of fresh produce and many good restaurants. But in Tokyo, restaurants create beautiful dishes that are assembled to play up the natural flavor of seasonal ingredients like bamboo shoots in the spring and pike eel in the summer. After months of fruitlessly seeking a San Francisco restaurant that would give us a taste of that experience, we decided we had no choice but to travel.

Autumn—known as the season for strong appetites in Japan—was the ideal time to take the trip because of the abundance of seasonal foods such as mushrooms, scallops, persimmons and delicious bonito fish, fattened up after a summer of feeding.

So my husband Patrick and I put together a 72-hour itinerary of multiple dinners, plus a trip to a hot-springs inn an hour away from Tokyo. Our goal was to pack in as many of our favorite restaurants (strictly Japanese ones) as possible. Multiple sushi meals and tempura were musts. And while it's possible to eat well on a budget in Tokyo, the brevity of our trip led us to throw cost to the wind. Lunches cost roughly $10 to $20, but we calculated dinners would cost $200 (about 18,200 yen) or more a person, including drinks.

DAY 1: Sea Urchin and Bordeaux

Patrick and I left San Francisco on a Thursday morning, which got us into Tokyo in time for dinner Friday afternoon. The journey—15 hours door-to-door—was all worth it as soon as we took a bite of the deep-fried tofu skin layered with mountain potato chips at Taku, a tiny sushi restaurant discreetly located in our old neighborhood in central west Tokyo. That was the start to an almost 30-course meal of bite-size dishes including *uni*, or sea urchin, from Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, and a white fish called halfbeak that was gently steam-grilled between bamboo leaves.

After a brief stop at the wine bar Elevage, where I had a 1982 Bordeaux, we concluded the evening at Shomin, a traditional Japanese *izakaya* bar that serves little plates of food with drinks. We stayed up long enough to have another drink and a snack of grilled rice ball, crunchy and toasted on the outside and moist on the inside and flavored with soy sauce. By the time we got back to our hotel it was 1:30 a.m.

DAY 2: The Joy of Soba

A mere seven hours later, we were at the Tsukiji Fish Market, one of the world's largest. Our favorite sushi bar inside the market was packed, so we ended up at Uogashi Senryou in the outer market. Its specialty: a three-in-one rice dish topped with many kinds of raw seafood, including uni, salmon roe and small pieces of tuna. The first serving is eaten by itself with soy sauce and wasabi, the second serving is mixed together with chopped braised vegetables, and the third is eaten in a light broth. The dish, known as *hitsumabushi*, is a take on the traditional version made with cooked eel.

After that heavy breakfast, our plan was to have a light soba—buckwheat noodle—lunch at another old standby, Hakone Akatsukian, near Roppongi, which is famous for its night-life. But temptation got the better of us, and we ordered soba sets with a square of fresh tofu and a side of tempura vegetables. True aficionados swear by zaru soba, or cold noodles dipped in a broth, rather than hot noodle soup, to fully appreciate the chewiness and the earthy buckwheat flavor. The dark dipping broth is later diluted with the hot water that the soba was cooked in to make a simple soup.

The second day concluded with a lavish tempura dinner at Sushi Tempura Aki in eastern Tokyo, where our favorite chef served us lightly battered vegetables and seafood

Clockwise from above, presenting fish at Kyubey, one of the city's top sushi restaurants; three stages in the soba (buckwheat-noodle) process at Hakone Akatsukian—cutting the dough, working the noodles and serving up the zaru soba (cold noodles) with broth for dipping, accompanied by vegetables, shrimp and a square of fresh tofu; a chef at work at Kyubey

Geoff Johnson for The Wall Street Journal

So many menus, so little time

Geoff Johnson for The Wall Street Journal (Aki, Elevage); Yukari Iwatani Kane/The Wall Street Journal (3); Marc Phu (Shomin); David Atkinson (map)

UOGASHI SENRYOU
4-10-14 Tsukiji
☎ 81-3-5565-5739
Web: itadori.co.jp/shop/shop_07.html
This hole in the wall in a maze of restaurants will (if you can find it) have menus in English. The specialty is the kaisen hitsumabushi, a mixture of rice and more than 12 kinds of fish and shellfish for 2,100 yen (about $23).

NISHI-AZABU TAKU
2-11-5 Nishi-Azabu, First Floor
☎ 81-3-5774-4372
Web: eatpia.com/taku/index.html
The chef's selection (omakase) starts at about 15,000 yen ($165).

HAKONE AKATSUKIAN
5-15-25 Minami-Azabu, Second Floor
☎ 81-3-3441-9006
Web: hakone-yumotohotel.com/bakery/an_index.html
Lunches are the best deal. A 1,500-yen ($16.50) set includes a square of tofu, a tempura of shiitake mushrooms stuffed with minced prawns and a serving of cold soba (buckwheat noodles).

HORAI
750-6 Izusan, Atami, Shizuoka
☎ 81-557-80-5151
Web: izusan-horai.com
The seaside city of Atami is just an hour by bullet train from Tokyo, on the Tokaido line. From the train station, this hot-springs inn is a five-minute taxi ride. Until recently a member of the Relais & Châteaux network, it boasts traditional architecture, two beautiful outdoor baths overlooking the Pacific and classically Japanese kaiseki (formal-course) cuisine. Rates start at about 34,000 yen ($374) a person, including dinner and breakfast (drinks are separate). Room reservations are best made by calling direct.

SUSHI TEMPURA AKI
2-1-9 Ningyocho, B1 Floor
☎ 81-3-3662-5555
Web: ameblo.jp/sushi-tenpura-aki
The restaurant is elegantly divided into sections for sushi and tempura. The sushi is good, but we come here for the tempura, made by the former head chef of the famous tempura restaurant at the Yamanoue (also known as Hilltop) Hotel. Meals can cost from 15,000 yen to 20,000 yen ($165 to $220) a person.

ELEVAGE
4-2-13
Nishi-Azabu,
Second Floor
☎ 81-3-6419-3889
Space in this tiny bar (two tables and a counter) is a bit tight but coveted by connoisseurs for the big choice of rare wines by the glass; it also serves spirits.

SHOMIN
4-22-8 Nishi-Azabu
☎ 81-3-3400-1666
The specialty is oden, a winter dish of daikon radish and various processed fishcakes, fishballs and meatballs in a light dashi broth. Also good: the yakitori (grilled chicken on skewers) and grilled riceballs. Open until early morning, Shomin gets crowded after 10 p.m.

KYUBEY
8-7-6 Ginza
☎ 81-3-3571-6523
Web: kyubey.jp/info_e.html
One of the city's top sushi restaurants, Kyubey takes reservations only for the 11:30 lunch seating and dinner seatings between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. Lunches start at 8,400 yen (about $93) and dinners at 15,750 yen ($174); to avoid a surprise bill at the end, order sets off the printed menu.

gently fried in 100% pure sesame oil and placed before us one by one. Real tempura is nothing like the greasy, batter-heavy version that is common outside Japan. Highlights included a fresh scallop fried so quickly that it was still raw on the inside, preserving its delicate flavor.

The challenge of planning a weekend trip to Japan is what to eat on Sundays, when most restaurants that are serious about food are closed because the fish market is shut. Our solution was to hop on the bullet train and travel to the seaside city of Atami, about an hour from Tokyo. We planned to spend a night at Horai, an old hot-springs inn known for lavish meals.

After soaking in big baths overlooking the Pacific Ocean, we were treated to a 10-course meal in our room that started with a sesame tofu and clear soup. That was followed by an array of sashimi including langoustine slices so recently cut that the head we were presented with was still twitching. After more courses that included a deep-fried rice cake with radish sauce and grilled scallops, we finished simply with a steamed bowl of rice, miso soup and pickled vegetables.

DAY 3: Ginza Gourmands

The next morning, the inn made a miso soup for us with the head of the langoustine. That accompanied a traditional breakfast of grilled fish, vegetables, rice and a small omelet made with a delicate broth.

After breakfast, we sped back to Tokyo for lunch—our final meal of the trip. Kyubey in the tony Ginza district is one of the city's most venerable sushi establishments, favored by countless politicians, executives and Hollywood stars such as Will Smith. Rare for a restaurant of its caliber, Kyubey has several locations (mostly in Tokyo), which gives it the scale to afford the highest-quality fish (the owner made news earlier this month when he participated in the purchase of a bluefin tuna for $175,000). When we sat down, head chef Mr. Taira immediately served us bright orange pearls of marinated salmon roe in a small bowl as we informed him that we were there for the dinner course.

Taking up the challenge, he served us translucent slices of various white fish, bonito stuffed with minced garlic and scallions, and a mixture of minced Japanese mackerel, miso, chopped scallions and ginger—a dish known as *namero*, which is loosely translated as "plate-licking good."

After cleansing our palates with a sandwich of thinly sliced radish and sour plum paste, we moved onto sushi. The sea urchin was sweet and creamy, the seared tuna fatty and flavorful and the raw shrimp so fresh that they were jumping off the counter as they waited to be peeled.

As we wondered how we could get on an eight-hour plane ride after the meal, Mr. Taira pushed one final square of melt-in-your-mouth omelet on us. "Think of it as dessert," he said.

Reaching new peaks

From a California mountain top, small yields and impressive results

By Matt Kramer

Saratoga, California

It's no news that, as part of its fabled abundance, California has long cultivated its share of cranks and visionaries. One was Martin Ray who, back in the 1940s, started a winery on a mountaintop.

Mr. Ray was not the first such "mountain man" in California wine, but he was arguably among the most visionary—and crankiest, in every sense. Mr. Ray, who died in 1976, was by all accounts the kind of you-gotta-believe-this salesman who missed his calling selling tchotchkes on late-night television. A former stock broker, he knew about business, having bought the Paul Masson winery—itself also originally located in Saratoga—from Paul Masson and eventually selling it to Joseph E. Seagram & Sons in 1943.

Mr. Ray first purchased 63 hectares of oak-studded mountaintop high above Saratoga in 1942 and subsequently bought another 63-hectare parcel lower down the slope. He then began to plant vines—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—which became the source of the distinction of the Martin Ray winery. Mr. Ray wanted wine greatness, and he never stopped telling people that he had grasped it. His wines, in fact, were famously variable. Some were indeed remarkable while others were just plain lousy. More than most wines by California producers at the time though, when Mr. Ray's wines were good, they were palate-smacking good.

Erin Kunkel for The Wall Street Journal

Eventually, Mr. Ray, entangled in disputes with shareholders, left the winery, and in 1972 the winery morphed into what is now Mount Eden Vineyards. It, too, went through a fair amount of winery tumult, with several owners and winemakers before stability arrived in the mid-1980s. (The Martin Ray name still exists on labels, although unconnected to Mount Eden Vineyards; a Central Valley winegrower purchased the label as a brand for grapes grown in Sonoma County.)

Jeffrey Patterson, 57, the winemaker at Mount Eden since 1983, and his wife, Ellie, who handles the business side, are now the majority owners of Mount Eden. They preside over Martin Ray's original vineyard site, with 14 hectares currently planted, and live in Mr. Ray's old house. The winery produces just 4,000 cases from the estate vineyard, plus another 16,000 cases from grapes purchased elsewhere. (The wines grown on the property are always identified on the label as "Estate.") In today's bigger-is-better California wine culture, where giants such as Gallo, Constellation Brands and Kendall-Jackson own dozens of wineries across the state, Mount Eden seems almost Hobbit-like in scale.

Finding your way to Martin Ray's old hilltop aerie involves more than the usual wine-touring effort. First, you get to Saratoga, an old logging town that turned genteel in the 1950s and then almost gold-plated in the 1990s, thanks to its proximity to nearby Cupertino and Apple Inc., which is just 10 kilometers away. After threading through a suburban sprawl of pseudo-Tuscan splendor, you see a street sign: Mount Eden Road. With that, not only do the McMansions disappear, but so too does the pavement. For more than three kilometers you jounce up a deeply rutted, serpentine dirt road that spirals its way to a 600-meter elevation where the winery and its famous estate vineyard reside. Suddenly, you are lofted into an almost monastic remove with a sweeping view of the high-tech hubbub of Silicon Valley—but with the sound turned off, like viewing a distant galaxy.

What sets Mount Eden apart is its vineyard site. Although the vineyard's 600-meter elevation is surely influential (the normal lapse rate tells us that temperature drops 3.5 degrees for every 300 meters in elevation), what really makes Mount Eden different is its soil. "Effectively, we don't have much soil, at least as most people understand soil," says Mr. Patterson. "Our topsoil is between just one and 12 inches (about 2.5 and 30 centimeters). Really, mostly it's just rock—Franciscan shale to be precise."

The result is a naturally low yield, meaning a small number of grape clusters per vine. In wine economics, how many or few clusters each vine proffers is the determining factor between success and failure. A low yield generally translates into higher quality grapes: A grapevine has only so much "oomph," and will typically deliver a better supply of nutrients, flavor and sugar to three or four clusters than it does to a dozen. The trick is to prune your vines so that the clusters per vine are few enough for quality but numerous enough for profit.

At Mount Eden, the challenge is keeping the yield up. "Typically we get one to two tons per acre (or per half-hectare), at most," says Mr. Patterson. "We're lucky if we even get close to two tons, actually." In comparison, vineyards on the Napa Valley floor routinely and easily get four tons an acre or even more.

The low yields make a big difference. The three varieties planted in the estate vineyard's 14 hectares of vines—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—are all nuanced grapes, capable of expressing what might be called the "voice of the land," but only when that voice is amplified by restricting the number of clusters per vine.

Mount Eden's most famous wine is its estate Chardonnay, which occupies seven hectares, half the estate vineyard. Its yields are among California's lowest. So in order to keep its finances afloat, Mount Eden also offers three other Chardonnays: Saratoga Cuvée, which is mostly barrels of wine from the estate vineyard that don't make the cut for the estate bottling; Wolff Vineyard Chardonnay from Edna Valley in the south central coast; and Zabala Vineyard in the Arroyo Seco zone of Monterey County. All of these Chardonnays are well received by critics and consumers, but the estate Chardonnay is the prize.

On my visit, Mr. Patterson hauled out his not-yet-released 2007 estate Chardonnay, the currently available (and thrilling) 2006 estate Chardonnay and a 1992 estate Chardonnay.

All were dense, even opulent wines suffused with a minerality rare in California (and more common in Burgundy). The two younger wines had focus and flavor delineation, where the scents and tastes of lemon and a whiff of hazelnut were delivered with almost digital precision.

But the 1992 estate Chardonnay was a wine in full, you might say, a complete experience where all the technical elements of balance, freshness and sheer savor are on display. What it had that the younger wines lacked was a dimensionality that takes time to unfurl from such a dense wine.

Mount Eden's estate Pinot Noir (two hectares) has changed over the years. Where once it was a rather hulking item, always hinting at possibilities because of its earthy "savor of site," it previously lacked finesse and the full measure of berryish fruit that distinguishes this variety.

"I've really worked hard on the Pinot Noir," said Mr. Patterson. He now uses about 35% "whole-cluster" grapes in making the wine, which means that whole clusters of unruptured grapes still attached to the stems are included with the destemmed grapes during fermentation. This approach is thought by many winemakers to enhance the berryish quality of Pinot Noir, with the stems adding spice and floral notes.

His work has paid off. Having tasted decades worth of Mount Eden Pinot Noirs, I'm prepared to say that the 2007 estate Pinot Noir is the best, most finesse-filled version I have yet tasted. It has a wild-cherry scent and taste and a lip-smacking earthiness rarely found in Pinot Noirs.

Cabernet Sauvignon (five hectares, including the blending grapes of Merlot and Cabernet Franc) is, for its part, perhaps the great Mount Eden secret. Here again, low yields and that unique soil makes the difference. Time is a necessity, though. Like a great Bordeaux, it's a wine that usually demands a leisurely stay in a cool cellar for its distinction to become apparent.

Matt Kramer is a contributing editor with Wine Spectator.

Two wines worth trying

Mount Eden Vineyard Chardonnay 'Estate' 2006, $48
If you asked me to choose just one California Chardonnay to serve to a skeptical European (or any other doubter from anywhere), among currently available offerings, this 2006 bottling is what I'd reach for. To borrow from the U.S. Army: Is it all it can be? Not yet. But it sure is good now, with a luscious richness and a lemon and hazelnut scent. And it will assuredly be great in years to come, if you've got a cool storage space.

Mount Eden Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 'Estate' 2005, $50
A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (75%), Merlot (22%) and Cabernet Franc (3%), this 2005 vintage is exceptionally supple and forward by Mount Eden Cabernet standards. (The not-yet-released 2006 is sterner stuff.) Few California cabernets deliver this degree of elegance allied to a flavor distinction so clearly derived from a site (dare I say terroir?), with a you-can't-miss-it minerality and scents and tastes of red currant, blackberries and plums.

Nothing to read

Publishers and studios close their doors to unsolicited manuscripts

By Katherine Rosman

Lisa Haney

In 1991, a book editor at Random House pulled from the "slush pile"—its collection of unsolicited manuscripts—a novel about a murder that roils a Baltimore suburb. Written by a first-time author and mother-to-be named Mary Cahill, "Carpool" was published to fanfare. Ms. Cahill was interviewed on the nationally televised morning news show "Today." "Carpool" was a bestseller.

That was the last time Random House, the largest publisher in the U.S., remembers publishing anything from the slush pile. Today, Random House and most of its major counterparts refuse to accept unsolicited material.

Getting plucked from the slush pile was always a long shot—in large part, editors and Hollywood development executives say, because most unsolicited material has gone unsolicited for good reason. But it did happen, including for works by Philip Roth, Anne Frank and Judith Guest. So the slush pile represented The Dream to legions of would-be novelists, journalists and screenwriters—not to mention "D-girls" and "manuscripts girls"—from Hollywood to New York who held the hope that finding a gem might catapult them from entry level to expense account.

Now, slush is dead, or close to extinction. Film and television producers won't read anything not certified by an agent because producers are afraid of being accused of stealing ideas and material. Most book publishers have stopped accepting book proposals that are not submitted by agents. Magazines say they can scarcely afford the manpower to cull through the piles looking for the Next Big Thing.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The Web was supposed to be a great democratizer of media. Anyone with a Flip video camera and Final Cut Pro software could be a filmmaker; anyone with a blog, a memoirist. But rather than empowering unknown artists, the Web is often considered by talent-seeking executives to be an unnavigable morass.

It used to be that you could bang out a screenplay on your typewriter, then mail it to a studio with a stamped return envelope and a prayer. Today, you can't even send an email to a studio. When visitors to the Universal Pictures Web site select the "contact us" option, they must agree to a waiver that frees Universal and its affiliates from liability related to accusations of plagiarism. "While we are always happy to hear from you," the Web notice says, "it is Universal's policy not to accept or consider creative materials, ideas, or suggestions other than those we specifically request. This is to avoid any misunderstandings if your ideas are similar to those we have developed independently."

"It does create an incredibly difficult Catch-22 on both sides, particularly for new writers wanting to get their work seen," says Hannah Minghella, president of production for Sony Pictures Animation.

Studios, already reluctant to read unsolicited scripts out of plagiarism concerns, became even more skittish when humorist Art Buchwald sued Paramount in 1990, alleging that it stole an idea from him and turned it into the Eddie Murphy vehicle "Coming to America." (Mr. Buchwald received an undisclosed settlement from the studio.) Fending off plagiarism lawsuits has become an increasing headache for both studios and publishers. "It's become the cultural version of malpractice," says novelist Kurt Andersen, who also hosts radio's "Studio 360."

Some producers make it easy: They just refuse to deal with new writers at all. Mike Clements, president of Good Humor, the production company founded by Tom Werner ("The Cosby Show"), has a personal policy against reading any sample or script that is not sent to him by an agent. "I make the occasional exception for a friend, or for my aunt," he says. "I just make them sign a release first."

As writers try to find an agent—a feat harder than ever to accomplish in the wake of agency consolidations and layoffs—the slush pile has been transferred from the floor of the editor's office to the attaché cases of representatives who can broker introductions to publishing, TV and film executives. The result is a shift in taste-making power onto such agents, managers and attorneys. Theirs are now often the first eyes to make a call on what material will land on bookshelves, television sets and movie screens.

Discoveries do happen at agencies, including the biggest publishing franchise since "Harry Potter"—though it basically took a mistake to come together. In 2003, an unknown writer named Stephenie Meyer sent a letter to the Writers House agency asking if someone might be interested in reading a 130,000-word manuscript about teenage vampires. The letter should have been thrown out: An assistant whose job included weeding through more than 100 such letters each month didn't realize that agents mostly expected young-adult fiction to weigh in at 40,000 to 60,000 words. She contacted Ms. Meyer and ultimately asked that she send her manuscript.

The manuscript, a novel called "Twilight," was passed on to an agent, Jodi Reamer. She liked what she read, signed Ms. Meyer, and got

The do's and don'ts of getting published

■ **Find an agent who's hungry—and "monetize."** "Anyone who wants to break in should read Variety and Hollywood Reporter and see which assistants have just been promoted to agents," says literary agent Ryan Saul of APA Talent & Literary Agency. Mr. Saul, who's also a screenwriting instructor, adds, "Anyone can teach a three-act structure. What I want students to get in the mind-set of is, 'How do we write something with the purpose of monetizing it?'"

■ **Don't be a barista waiting for someone to stumble upon your genius.** "Our editors travel, they get around," says Carol Schneider, spokeswoman for Random House Publishing Group. "They look at writer's conferences, at MFA programs. They look at magazine articles and at blogs. That's what editors do—they sniff things out from so many different sources."

■ **Find another way in.** Slush-pile finds "are the rare exception that give people hope," says David Granger, editor in chief of Esquire magazine. "If we found one writer a year that sent things in randomly, that would be a lot...agents are necessary gatekeepers but it's nice if there is an alternative entry...there are subversive ways to get your stuff read—you just have to be dedicated. A writer I know wasn't able to get treatments read so he started rendering them as comic books."

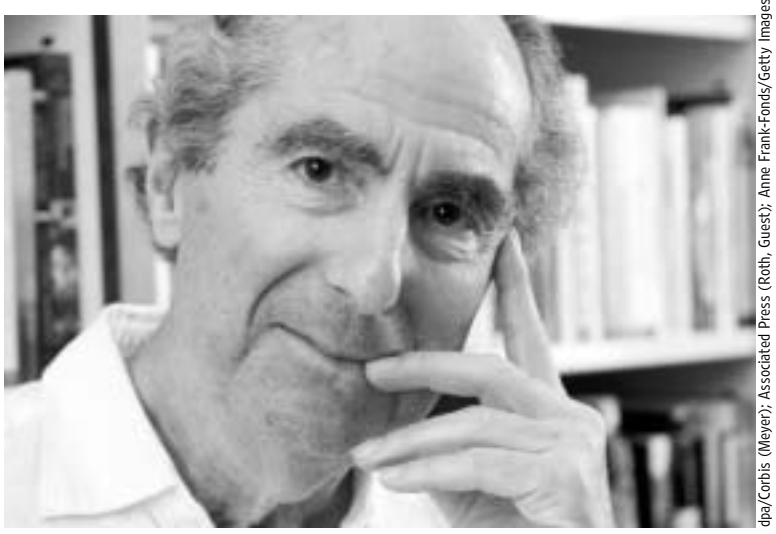
■ **Contests!** "I'm always wary to recommend to writers that they go to competitions too much because there are fees and they can end up spending a lot of money," says Hannah Minghella, president of production at Sony Animation Studios, who was formerly in development at Miramax. "But the ones that do get industry attention are really fantastic opportunities to network and to make important relationships."

■ **And buck up.** In 1957, Tom Wolfe interviewed best-selling author James Michener, who had once been a slush-pile reader. Mr. Wolfe asked him if he had worried about competition lurking in the slush piles when he submitted his first book—"Tales of the South Pacific," which would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize—to publishers. "If you've ever read a slush pile," said Mr. Michener, "you'd know I had nothing to worry about." Says Mr. Wolfe, "He knew how much garbage there was out there."

ANNE FRANK
"Diary of a Young Girl" had been published in Holland and was headed to France. But Doubleday's Paris office had marked it for rejection. Judith Jones, then a "girl Friday," disobeyed her boss and alerted Doubleday's New York editors, and the English-language edition came out in 1952.

JUDITH GUEST
When Minnesota mom Ms. Guest sent out "Ordinary People" in 1975, it was refused by the first publisher. Another wrote, "While the book has some satiric bite, overall the level of writing does not sustain interest and we will have to decline it." It became a bestseller and an Oscar-winning movie.

STEPHENIE MEYER
The author of the "Twilight" series sent 15 query letters about her teenage-vampire saga. She got nearly 10 rejection letters; one even arrived after she had signed with an agent and received a three-book deal from Little, Brown. Ms. Meyer doesn't need to send out query letters anymore.



PHILIP ROTH
In 1958, Mr. Roth was an unknown who had barely been published when a short story titled "The Conversion of the Jews" was plucked out of a heap at the literary magazine the Paris Review—by Rose Styron, wife of novelist William Styron. The next year it was published as part of "Goodbye, Columbus."

dpa/Corbis (Meyer); Associated Press (Roth, Guest); Anne Frank-Fonds/Getty Images (Frank)

a deal from Little, Brown. The fourth and most recent book in what became the "Twilight" series, "Breaking Dawn," sold 1.3 million copies the day it went on sale in August 2008. Two of the books have been made into films; the latest grossed more than $288 million in the U.S.

At William Morris Endeavor Entertainment, Adriana Alberghetti reads only scripts sent to her by producers, managers and lawyers whose taste she knows and trusts. The agent says she receives 30 unsolicited emails a day from writers and people she doesn't know who are pushing unknown writers, and she hits "delete" without opening. These days she is taking on few "baby writers," she says—adding that risks she would have taken five years ago she won't today. "I'll take very few shots on a new voice. It's tough out there right now," she says.

Book publishers say it is now too expensive to pay employees to read slush that rarely is worthy of publication. At Simon & Schuster, an automated telephone greeting instructs aspiring writers: "Simon & Schuster requires submissions to come to us via a literary agent due to the large volume of submissions we receive each day. Agents are listed in 'Literary Marketplace,' a reference work published by R.R. Bowker that can be found in most libraries." Company spokesman Adam Rothberg says the death of the publisher's slush pile accelerated after the terror attacks of 9/11 by fear of anthrax in the mailroom.

A primary aim of the slush pile used to be to discover unpublished voices. But today, writing talent isn't necessarily enough. It helps to have a big-media affiliation, or be effective on TV. "We are being more selective in taking on clients because the publishers are demanding much more from the authors than ever before," says Laurence J. Kirshbaum, former chief executive of Time Warner Book Group and now an agent. "From a publisher's standpoint, the marketing considerations, especially on nonfiction, now often outweigh the editorial ones."

Getting an opportunity in Hollywood as a writer once required little more than affiliation with elite institutions like the Harvard Lampoon, the humor magazine which spawned writers for "The Simpsons" and a host of others. The Web was supposed to dismantle such barriers. And to be sure, the Web has provided a path for some writers who use it well.

Scott Belsky, a 29-year-old Web entrepreneur whose sites include "The 99 Percent," wanted to write a book on how to succeed in the creative industries. To secure representation, he approached agents with data on his Web traffic, samples of reader comments posted on the site, and the number of times various posts had been blogged about, tweeted and retweeted on social-networking site Twitter. This data convinced Jim Levine at Levine Greenberg Literary Agency to take on Mr. Belsky as a client. Mr. Levine used the information to land him a book deal. "Making Ideas Happen" will be published in April by Portfolio, a division of Penguin Group.

"These days, you need to deliver not just the manuscript but the audience," says Mr. Levine. "More and more, the mantra in publishing is, 'Ask not what your publisher can do for you, ask what you can do for your publisher.'"

But relationships still trump everything. Consider the path of one television series, "Sons of Tucson," set to debut on Fox in March. The show, a sitcom about kids who hire a ne'er-do-well to stand in as their father after their real dad is sent to prison, was created and co-written by neophytes—a rare event.

Tommy Dewey and Greg Bratman worked hard to get their big break, but because Mr. Dewey had done some acting, he was able to sign with a manager. The manager introduced them to a producer, Harvey Myman, who helped them develop a pilot script and got them a meeting with Fox, which ordered a pilot, then the series.

"Sons of Tucson" shows that unknowns can still make it—if they make some connections. "You really do rely on other people to be the arbiters of what may and may not work," says Marcus Wiley, a Fox TV executive.

"If I was an agent submitting to an executive," he adds, "I'm going to be calling that executive next week for something else. So the chances of me claiming plagiarism are slim. This keeps both sides honest."

Despite the refrain that most everything sent to the slush pile is garbage, publishing executives confess to a nagging fear of missing something big. "Harry Potter" was submitted to 12 publishers (by an agent), all of whom rejected it. A year later, Bloomsbury published it in the U.K.

In 2008, HarperCollins launched Authonomy.com, a Web slush pile. Writers upload manuscripts, readers vote for their favorites, and each month HarperCollins editors read readers' top five. About 10,000 manuscripts have been loaded so far; HarperCollins has bought four.

The first, "The Reaper," came out in July and sold moderately well. Another, a young-adult book called "Fairytale of New York," was released in November and has sold more than 100,000 copies; it's a best-seller in Britain. HarperCollins also launched a similar platform for teen writers called "InkPop."

One slush stalwart—the literary journal the Paris Review—has college interns and graduate students in its New York loft-office read the 1,000 unsolicited works submitted each month. Each short story is read by at least two people. If one likes it and the other doesn't, it is read by a third. Any submission that receives two "Ps" for "pass" as opposed to "R" for "reject" is read by an editor.

"We take the democratic ideal represented by the slush pile seriously," says managing editor Caitlin Roper.

But in the end the Paris Review publishes just one unsolicited piece each year—which means each slush-pile manuscript's chance of rising to the top is about 0.008%.

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A story of her own

Writer Joyce Carol Oates tackles a memoir after loss and love

By Alexandra Alter

Joyce Carol Oates has published more than 50 novels, more than 30 short-story collections and an endless stream of essays and reviews—and that's not counting her novellas, plays and children's books. Now, at 71 and newly remarried, she is tackling a subject she has seldom explored in her work: herself.

Ms. Oates recently finished writing a more-than-400-page memoir detailing the aftermath of her husband Raymond Smith's death in February 2008. She describes the book, "A Widow's Memoir," as practical and darkly funny (Ms. Oates says she plans to include a "widow's handbook" with advice on fundamentals such as how to pick out a grave plot).

"There's a lot that's very private, and when I reread it, I may think, I don't want anyone to see this," she said in an interview at her home in New Jersey.

Ms. Oates seems more shocked than anyone to find herself, nearly 50 years into her writing career, entering a new phase in her life. After losing her husband, she unexpectedly fell in love again and married Princeton University neuroscientist Charles Gross last spring.

Since then, she says, her writing habits, hobbies and outlook on life have changed. She has started going on mountain hikes with Mr. Gross, who loves the outdoors. Last year, the newlyweds moved into a large two-story home filled with colorful contemporary paintings, mobile sculptures and Mr. Gross's photographs of African fauna and temples and palaces in Tibet. Ms. Oates, a confessed homebody who hasn't traveled widely overseas, said she plans to join her husband on some of his adventures.

Novelist Russell Banks, her friend for nearly 30 years, said he's surprised by her transformation.

"I've seen a change in her over the last year and a new sense of adventure and excitement," he said.

Though a few years ago Ms. Oates agreed to publish journal entries penned from 1973 to 1982, writing a memoir never interested her much before the shock of her husband's death. After Mr. Smith died from complications following pneumonia, Ms. Oates found herself unable to write fiction for months. But she kept a journal, and that provided the backbone for her memoir, which details the three months following her husband's death.

Joyce Carol Oates

Opale/ Retna Ltd.

Describing the work, Ms. Oates headed off comparisons with Joan Didion's memoir, "The Year of Magical Thinking." Her memoir won't be as "somber or sober," she said.

"All of her friends are glad she's doing it, not because it will be a therapy for her, but because I think it will be interesting to see what she says," author Richard Ford, a friend of Ms. Oates since the early 1980s, said of the memoir.

Ms. Oates is still writing at a furious pace. She has just released a new novel titled "A Fair Maiden," a dark novel she wrote in two months. She has a short-story collection, "Sourland," due in the autumn.

Mr. Gross frequently reads her work in progress—and weighs in with edits and suggestions, Ms. Oates said. His involvement marks a stark change from her writing relationship with her former husband of nearly 50 years, who was an editor and publisher. Mr. Smith read and edited her essays and reviews, but never read her fiction. She and Mr. Smith agreed he had enough to read for work, and Ms. Oates also "felt that I needed more privacy; that I wanted my own space."

Living with a scientist has had an unexpected effect on her work, Ms. Oates said. "If I have Charlie read something of mine—he wants to read all my writing—and I have something that's approximate or metaphorical, he will say, No, that's really not right," and she will rewrite the passage to be more specific, she said.

Ms. Oates said her ideal workday starts around 8 a.m. and lasts until early afternoon. She writes by hand in notebooks and on scattered scraps of paper at a large desk in an upstairs study overlooking the garden. She types up the manuscript and keeps her notes on hand as a guide; eventually, they go into her archive at Syracuse University. Her office has two tall bookcases filled with her own books—she rarely has time to reread any of them, she said—and separate shelves with other treasured works, including a 1948 edition of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" that her grandmother gave her when she was a child. Bowls of cat food and water for her cat, Cherie, sit on the floor near her desk.

Ms. Oates was born and raised in rural upstate New York, a region that she frequently explores in her fiction. She began writing novels in high school. As a junior at Syracuse, she won a fiction contest at Mademoiselle magazine, launching her career. In the decades since, she has averaged two books a year and tackled genres ranging from children's literature to horror to literary realism. She has won the National Book Award and been nominated several times for the Pulitzer Prize, but literary critics have often focused (unfairly, in Ms. Oates's opinion) on her massive output and her fascination with violence.

She's an obsessive self-editor. She has rewritten short stories and revised a novel after publication for anthologies or updated editions of her books. She had a finished manuscript of her recent novel, "Little Bird of Heaven," but held onto it and rewrote it after her husband's death, in part to keep herself occupied.

During a reading in the autumn at Barnes & Noble in New York, Ms. Oates told the audience that "Little Bird of Heaven" was "a lifeline" after her husband died, and the only thing that got her out of bed. After reading for 20 minutes, she took questions. The first one caught her off guard.

"Do you know how many books you've written?" a man asked.

"No, I don't," she said, adding "When I first heard your question, I thought you asked how many words I had written. That would be insane."

Bolly to Hollywood

Can '3 Idiots' win over a Western audience?

By Lauren A.E. Schuker

The Academy Award-winning success of "Slumdog Millionaire" raised expectations that Indian movies were starting to go global. Now, a Bollywood film is testing those assumptions.

"3 Idiots," a nearly three-hour film about a trio of engineering students who fight against the pressurized system of higher education, brought in more than $75 million at the world-wide box office in its first three weeks in theaters. (It was made for just over $10 million.) In the U.S., it took in $5.6 million. In India, the movie is breaking records.

Can it truly cross over? It's unclear who's filling the seats. "There is a large diaspora in the U.S., and they account for some of that audience," says Sanjeev Lamba, chief executive of Reliance Big Pictures, which released the film and is determined to be global. Producer Vinod Chopra estimates that the movie will pass the $100 million mark over the coming weeks, as it continues to attract repeat moviegoers in India and the U.S. and opens in new territories such as Italy and Germany.

"Slumdog" (which grossed $141.3 million in U.S. theaters, according to Boxofficemojo.com) included some Bollywood conventions. But it was distributed by a major Hollywood studio and co-directed and written by Westerners, and the film mostly omitted the musical interludes so

A scene from '3 Idiots'

Vinod Chopra Films

frequent in Bollywood.

In case "3 Idiots" runs out of steam on this go-round, Reliance has other strategies. For the first time, the company will release a movie in two versions. The U.S. version of the romantic thriller "Kites" will be about half an hour shorter and feature different music, says Mr. Lamba. The producers are also talking to Hollywood about a U.S. remake of "3 Idiots," Mr. Chopra says. After all, stressed-out students everywhere might relate to the movie's theme.

Says Mr. Lamba: "A lot of people do things because of parents and societal pressure, and this film shows that you can fly against convention and do wonderful things. It says: 'Don't be stupid, but be an idiot.'"

Chinese Propaganda Uncensored

By Ilaria Maria Sala

Beijing

"Propaganda has always been vital for the Chinese Communist Party. Mao Zedong understood its power very clearly, and since the beginning he made sure that it was taken very, very seriously by all. But in propaganda . . . everything is fake, of course. A lot like in advertisements, and today

A Second History
Zhang Dali
SZ Art Center, 798 District, Beijing
Dec. 12 through Feb. 28

China has both—advertisements and propaganda!" says Chinese artist Zhang Dali, speaking excitedly in his vast studio on the outskirts of this city. Despite his earlier qualms that the topic might be too sensitive to handle, his show "A Second History," which juxtaposes historical political photos before and after the intervention of the censors, has just opened at the SZ Art Center, at 798, an arts hub in northern Beijing that has taken over the grounds of a former military factory.

It is a project that has kept Mr. Zhang—famous for having brought graffiti art to China and for threading the fine line between social and overtly political art—busy for more than five years. He has spent countless hours combing libraries and photographic archives around the country, searching for published propaganda pictures and the original negatives and prints from which they were produced.

The range of doctored photos he has collected is astounding: leaders airbrushed in and out of history as their political glory waxed and waned, peasants on whose chests shiny Mao badges are penciled in, a photogenic sheep that makes an appearance on various occasions when the leaders are required to look pastoral. In pictures of political rallies, out-of-favor slogans on banners are substituted with the latest ones; a formerly half-visible slogan held high by the rallying crowd now says: "American imperialism is the ugliest enemy of world peace." Revolutionary heroes pose against evergreen backgrounds after naked winter branches have been cut out, and peasants' homes have the walls decorated with Mao portraits.

On occasion the same photo or some of its elements are utilized more than once, following the political trends of the times. One such picture shows Mao at Yan'an—the Communist "revolutionary base" during the civil war—walking alone on a dirt road. In the background is the barren landscape of Central China, with a few peasants toiling or clapping at Mao's passage, and a tall, slim pagoda sitting atop a low mountain, framing the scene. A few years later, the same photo was amended to show Mao alone in the dry surroundings, a lone hero with the weight of the revolution

SZ Art Center

Zhang Dali's installation pairs propaganda images with their unaltered originals.

on his shoulders. Then, in the late '70s, the picture was given one more lease on life as a landscape shot: "Even Mao has been erased, to show only what Yan'an [now a favorite site for 'red tourism'] looked like originally," says Mr. Zhang with a chuckle.

"I started this research because I was wondering how to explore what is not clearly visible," he explains. "I was wondering how to get into the head of someone else—the censors, in this instance. My photographic project has revealed some unexpected things: the main one, that propaganda is much more complex than it seems; it encompasses more than simply making a political point. What the censors were doing was not simply faking documents but also obeying the aesthetic requirements of the time. Unattractive faces become beautiful, short people become tall, narrow eyes are widened," he comments, showing an album of some of his findings.

The message to be conveyed was at times presented subtly, as in one of Mr. Zhang's favorite examples, a famous picture from 1952 with Premier Zhou Enlai, Mao and Gen. Zhu De saluting the parading troops from a podium on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army. In the original shot, one can spot the half-visible heads of five young, smiling soldiers in the background, the leaders protected by a balustrade in front of them, with two round paper parasols shading their heads from the fierce August sun. But this version of the photo was short-lived. In the one that most Chinese are familiar with, the balustrade is gone—and so are the delicate parasols. And in the background the smiling faces have been replaced by plant leaves, leaving the three men to salute in solitary splendor.

"It is very revealing, and at least there are records for most of this. You can see the pictorial propaganda magazines printed at the time, and if you look, you are going to find also the pieces of cut-out photos—a head there, a sheep here, or a whole group of people that has been removed.

* * *

"This alteration of political images continues today too, of course. But it is much less obvious, and a few years from now nobody will be able to prove it: The technology has changed; you do not need scissors anymore, just a few minutes on Photoshop, and nobody will ever know," adds Mr. Zhang, voicing his worry about the "carefree way in which we Chinese are altering historical records."

At the SZ Art Center, meanwhile, visitors in their 50s can be seen exclaiming in front of doctored photos they have known since childhood. "The majority of Chinese people know that this kind of thing has been going on, but what surprises them is how widespread and systematic it is. That's what is so interesting," concludes Mr. Zhang.

Ms. Sala is a writer based in Hong Kong.

Obama Mia!

By Daniel Schwammenthal

"Hope—The Obama Musical Story" premiered in Frankfurt Sunday evening. One is tempted to end the review right there. Seriously, isn't the oeuvre's title and premature timing commentary enough? Sure, the U.S. president has been (favorably) compared to God but even Jesus Christ had to wait nearly 2,000 years before he became a Superstar.

With polls showing that most Americans now realize they are being (mis)led by a mere mortal, it is no coincidence that this production had its debut in Germany. Here the president's messiah status (remember the 200,000 worshipers at his 2008 Berlin speech?) is still accepted dogma and helped fill the Jahrhunderthalle, a 2,000-seat venue.

"In no way does Hope show Obama as a saint," the musical's organizers say on their Web site. And truly, as the mostly American cast tells, through song and dance, the story of Mr. Obama's rise from a Chicago community organizer to the White House, we learn of the president's human imperfections—or at least one: "He's an idealist," the Mrs. Obama character says with a hint of disapproval. Despite this serious character flaw, the ensemble sings upon his election: "Celebrate! Celebrate! Around the world every nation celebrate."

Sen. Harry Reid will probably be pleased to learn that the actor playing Mr. Obama is sufficiently

Associated Press

Della Miles and Jimmy Wilson as the First Couple.

"light skinned" to portray the president and did not sing with any discernable "Negro accent." And, always a plus for an actor as well as a president, he was able to perform without a teleprompter. He got to sing numbers like "Yes We Can," and "Look Without Hands," which I first thought was a commentary on the president's foreign and economic policies but turned out to be a eulogy to his grandmother.

Much of the material was taken from stump speeches, but there was also a lot of "original" writing. Take the romantic highlight of the show, when Barack woos Michelle in a love duet. "I think we fit together like a hand inside a glove—I know this is no ordinary kind of love." One would HOPE that even Mr. Obama's speech writers could have rhymed better than this.

In one cliffhanger, Michelle is stricken by self-doubt—I guess that's what they mean by "artistic freedom." Without spoiling too much of the plot, Michelle's mother manages to reassure her that she has what it takes to be a First Lady. "Walk in your glory. Think like a queen, for you are royalty."

Of course no story is complete with just a hero. And so enter the villains: drug dealers in Mr. Obama's community organizing days and, in more recent times—you've guessed it—Republicans. In his solo, Sen. John McCain challenges Mr. Obama with lines like: "See you in November, and I'm the Great Defender." Personally, I prefer the real maverick's performance, Sen. McCain's unforgettable rendition of that old Beach Boy song, "Bomb Iran."

Strangely, Mr. McCain was played by a German, hence his introduction of Sarah Palin as his "Runny mate." Mrs. Palin, by the way, whose solo was bizarrely accompanied by scantily clad dancers in gothic outfits, was played by the same actress also standing in as Hillary Clinton—a subtle hint to the president, perhaps, not to trust his secretary of state.

In what the writer probably thought was a clever plot construction, a parallel story line centers on the residents of a "typical" Chicago neighborhood hit by unemployment, foreclosures and the war. The pre-Obama era is "Chaos!" as the first song reminds us. Among the assorted stereotypes is the Obama-supporting African-American Johnson family; and your archetypical Republican: an elderly woman of German background who doesn't think much of "colored" people. But, with the Obama spirit already healing the planet, the German bigot and Mr. Johnson declare in a heart-warming duet after the elections: "We can be friends." Yes, we can.

When the Johnsons learn that their son has gone missing in Iraq, they are consoled by none other than Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Perhaps the news about the good Reverend's tragic accident with the campaign bus didn't make it to Germany. Thankfully, neither did any of his anti-American sermons. Instead, the Wright character gets to sing a couple of soaring gospels, promising "Everything will be all right, all right, he'll make it all right."

And so He did. No sooner has Mr. Obama been elected than the Johnsons learn their missing son is alive and that the war will probably soon be over. Call it the inauguration miracle.

But ignoring the political propaganda, does it work as a musical? Well, you can't get more off-off Broadway than this. The awkward dialogue, the flat characters and poor acting make this show, at more than three hours, feel longer than the presidency. Some songs—ranging from pop and soul to hip-hop and gospel—were pleasant enough. I even caught myself tapping along to one or two numbers. But in the end, does it really matter?

The musical's American composer and lyricist, Randall Hutchins, who lives in Germany, says his show is not "political." Right, but only in the sense that Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" was just a documentary. The audience's standing ovation at the end was probably as ideologically overdetermined as my trashing of this hagiography. I confess, I did come to bury "Hope," not to praise it. Personality cult is an irredeemable flaw in both the arts and journalism.

Mr. Schwammenthal is an editorial writer for The Wall Street Journal Europe.

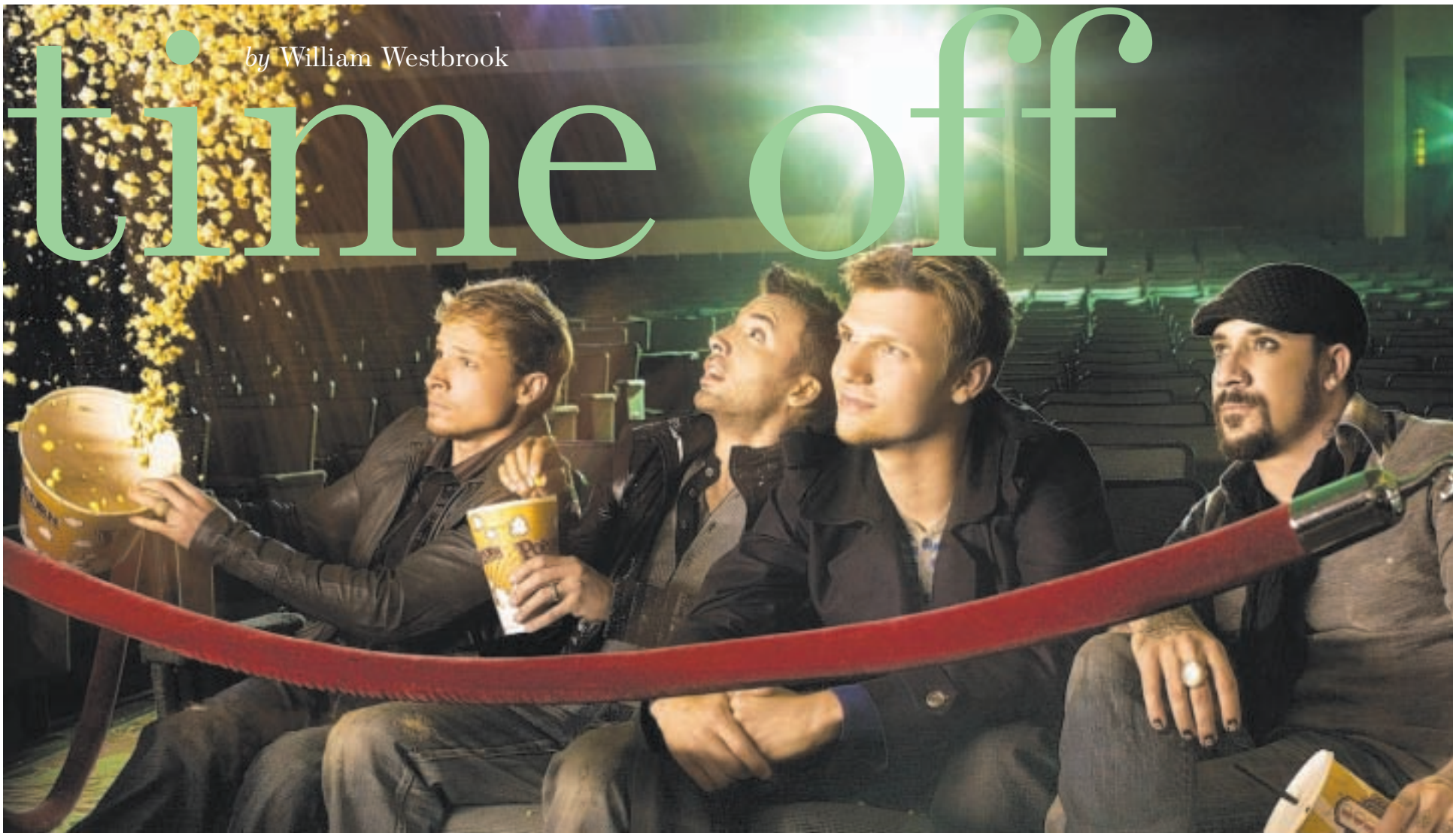
Pepper . . . and Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"Why thank you. As quarterly reports go, it was very cathartic."

time off

by William Westbrook



From the top, Tour: The Backstreet Boys are back; Singapore: Sphinx of Amenhotep III, from 'Quest for Immortality'; Hong Kong: Liu Yang with his erhu

Bangkok

CONCERT

Mahler's Ninth Symphony: Having played Mahler's long, challenging fifth symphony last July, the young Siam Philharmonic—formed in 2002—takes it up a notch with his ninth symphony, which requires enormous forces and can easily break 80 minutes. The orchestra's founder and artistic director, Somtow Sucharitkul, will conduct.

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Admission: 200 baht to 1,000 baht.
☎ 66-2262-3456
Web: www.thaiticketmajor.com

Beijing

EXHIBITION

Asian Landmark: Paintings, sculptures, videos and installations by 20 artists, in what aims to establish communication between the corporate and the cultural, so as to fuse the constructive force of private capital with the redemptive power of contemporary art and create a more humanitarian management model and spirit.

Iberia Center for Contemporary Art
Zone E06,
798 Art District,
4 Jiuxianqiao Lu,
Chaoyang District; to Feb. 28, Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Free admission.
☎ 86-10-5978-9530
Web: www.iberiart.org

Hong Kong

OPERA

Daughter of the Regiment: This 1840 French opera by Donizetti (he was Italian, but spent some time in Paris) helped make a star of Luciano Pavarotti in the 1960s, thanks to his nailing a string of high Cs. It's a comedy, which in opera means everyone survives to the end, and there's even a wedding between the title character and her true love, Tonio.

City Hall Concert Hall,
5 Edinburgh Place, Central;
Jan. 29 and 31, 8 p.m.;
Jan 30, 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.
Admission: HK$150 to HK$600.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

CONCERT

The Great Wall Capriccio: Liu Wenjin leads the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in a selection of his own works, part of the orchestra's Composers' Festival. The program opens with two movements from the title piece, a concerto for erhu (Liu Yang will solo), and closes with what is probably Mr. Liu's best-known tune, "Jasmine."

City Hall Concert Hall,
5 Edinburgh Place, Central;
Jan. 22 and 23, 8 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$260.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

Macau

CONCERT

2manydjs: This will be the last of eight Asian stops for this Belgian dance-music duo (the two are set to play Osaka, Tokyo and Seoul on Jan. 22, 23 and 29, respectively). Supporting DJs will include Miss Yellow, David Lam and Frankie Lam from Hong Kong, Hernandez from Portugal, D'Mond from Macau and VJ Voltage.

Bellini Lounge, The Venetian Macao, Estrada da Baía de N. Senhora da Esperança, The Cotai Strip; Jan. 30, 10 p.m.
Admission: 340 patacas.
☎ 853-2882-8818
Web: www.cotaiticketing.com

Singapore

EXHIBITION

Quest for Immortality: Subtitled "The World of Ancient Egypt," this exhibition—drawing on the collection of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum—explores how the Egyptians prepared for a smooth progression to the afterlife. The final room is a burial chamber housing relics that include canopic jars (to hold the deceased's organs) and shabtis (clay effigies of servants, for afterlife housekeeping), plus a linen-wrapped human mummy.

National Museum of Singapore,
93 Stamford Rd.; to April 4,
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Admission: S$15.
☎ 65-6332-3659
Web: www.nationalmuseum.sg

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (sculpture); Sony Music (Boys); Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra (Liu)

Tour: Asia/Australia

CONCERT

Backstreet Boys: One danger in using "boys" in your singing group's name is that 17 years later you may still be in business, with the youngest member bumping into 30 (happy birthday, Nick!) and the oldest closer to 40. Well, success has its price. Other stops include Nagoya, Taipei, and Melbourne.

Tokyo: Saitama Super Arena,
8 Shintoshin, Chuo-ku, Saitama-shi;
Feb. 7, 4 p.m.
Admission: 9,000 yen and 18,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3462-6969
Web: eplus.jp
Seoul: Melon-Ax Hall, 319-33 Kwangjang-dong, Kwangjin-gu;
Feb. 24, 8 p.m.
Admission: 110,000 won.
☎ 82-2-1544-1555
Web: ticket.interpark.com
Manila: Araneta Coliseum,
Quezon City; Feb. 27, 8 p.m.
Admission: 480 pesos to 4,760 pesos.
☎ 63-2-911-5555
www.ticketnet.com.ph
Singapore: Suntec International Convention & Exhibition Hall,
1 Raffles Blvd., Suntec City;
Feb. 28, 8 p.m.
Admission: S$68 to S$148.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com
Sydney: Entertainment Centre,
Darling Harbour; March 6, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: A$89.90 and A$98.90.
☎ 61-136-100
Web: www.ticketmaster.com.au